

PARENTING IN A CROSS CULTURAL SETTING

The January/February 1992 issue of Women's Concerns Report focused on "Parenting in a Cross-Cultural Setting." It included ideas and insights from current and former Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) workers, reflecting on their experiences of parenting overseas. The issue was compiled by Emily Will, who worked with MCC in Mexico and Jamaica.

Articles in that issue included: "Packing Up," "Settling In," "Children--Slowing Us Down, Speeding Us Up," "Saying Thank You in Setswana," "The Sunday Morning Challenge," "When in France," "Playtime," and "Support Network." Copies of that issue of Women's Concerns Report are available from Report Editor, Mennonite Central Committee, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

Following are two additional articles that were not included in that issue because of space limitations.

THE ABC'S OF EDUCATION

Parents' natural worry about their children's education is often intensified in another culture. Hopefully knowing some of the options, as outlined below with their pros and cons, will take an edge off the anxiety this topic engenders.

Although not every option is available everywhere, MCC families have four basic schooling choices: (1) home schooling; (2) local public or private schools; (3) international or "American" schools; and (4) boarding schools.

Home Schooling

Despite having home schooled herself, Joanne Koopmans, MCC Indonesia, claims, "The easiest way for a woman to become a husband's baggage (although indispensable) in overseas work is to home school the kids."

Many MCCers, however, have no choice. Due to isolated settings or special circumstances, they must home school. They are quick to confirm Koopmans' remark that home schooling takes much time and energy and often limits the teacher's, usually the mother's, outside involvements.

Kathy Fast, Botswana, home schooled her oldest child on a previous assignment in Nigeria. She described some obstacles: "Reynold was hungry for social interaction; it's difficult to be mother/teacher/friend to your child. Also the teaching environment is not ideal with a baby and a toddler messing around beside you or getting into trouble when you're attempting to give full attention to your home schooling."

"When we were considering coming to Botswana," Fast added, "we felt it was very important to have a good school for the children. I don't

think we would have considered coming if it had meant home schooling."

Other parents, however, find home schooling highly rewarding. They are energized by the challenge it represents and welcome the opportunity for close interaction with their child. They enjoy seeing their child blossom intellectually under their tutelage.

Academically, home schooling has much merit. Children learn independence, a sense of responsibility and pride in their progress. Some of the time demands can be alleviated if home schooling can be shared with other families.

For some MCC parents, home schooling has proven easier than expected. "Themba is so curious that he almost teaches himself," reported Harvey Harman, South Africa.

After enumerating the drawbacks and sacrifices of home schooling, Eleanor Nash, former MCCer in Nigeria, made the following assessment: "Both girls are very positive about their schooling time overseas and the experience drew us all closer together. They have both done very well academically since returning to North America and the academic resources teacher has commended me for an excellent teaching job."

Canadian residents are fortunate in that provincial Ministries of Education provide quality correspondence course curricula; those from the United States must research what is available.

Local Schools

It doesn't help to be U.S.-trained teachers... We find ourselves critical of the system for its lack of organization and lack of child orientation. With time I suppose we'll get used to daily homework, although it's hard to get excited about the rote copying exercises. --Paula Kuhns, MCC Mexico

"Local school" is used here to refer to a school rooted in the local culture. The spectrum is large, however, from a public village school to a private "elite" school in the capital city; the academic standards vary accordingly.

"The village school was low in its academic standards and had virtually no resources other than the teacher's ingenuity," remarked Joanne Koopmans, an observation echoed by other MCCers.

From her children's experience in a private school in a small Brazilian city, Evelyn Koop compiled the following list of educational values that differ from those prevailing in Canada:

1. A greater emphasis is placed on exam performance than on real learning.
2. Even small children are expected to do homework, which often involves memorization and rote assignments.
3. There is a high teacher orientation, often accompanied by low student involvement. For example, the teacher may make the Mother's Day gifts, with children "allowed" to watch.

4. Teachers may attack students' self-esteem to motivate the class; for example, commenting on how ugly or poorly done a student's work is.

"Be prepared to spend a lot of time with your children on school work. Teachers hand out work but don't teach. That it's in another language further complicates matters," commented Don Peters, Brazil.

Sending children to national schools has advantages, however. The child is immersed in the new culture and its language, an education in itself. Their world view is enlarged as they study history and social studies from a much different perspective than that presented in North America. Local schools provide opportunities for social interaction; classmates often become important buddies.

Sending children to local schools signals to the community that the MCC family is taking local culture seriously and respectfully. Neighbors may react with a sense of bewilderment or wonder, assuming their institutions are far too inferior for North American children.

Children's attendance at national schools may also provide cultural "ins" for the parents. "Germans tend to be 'private' and a bit class conscious; being involved in the local school puts one on an immediate equal footing," observed LaVerna Reimer, MCC Germany.

Fortunately, school days are short in most countries; students are out by noon or 1 p.m. The short schedule allows time for play, supplemental work in the first language, etc.

Then, too, some of the negatives later become positives, as Gladys Block pointed out: "Jamaican schools stress homework from grade one on. Our children were happy for that experience when they got back to Canada. They had learned to study and to prepare for exams while their peers had not."

American or International Schools

It is difficult to straddle two worlds. We find ourselves stretched and spending a lot of time trying to explain the sense of such cultural gymnastics to our children. They go to an "American" school with students and teachers who are mostly American. Their first choice for eating out is usually McDonalds or Pizza Hut. Yet our work is with Filipinos. While I bounce around on a jeepneys in the mountains of Mindanao, sleeping on bamboo slats in a thatched roof house, my kids could be bowling at an automatic bowling alley in an air-conditioned shopping mall. When I attend open house on Back-to-School Night, I am reminded what different worlds my children and I live in. --Joy Hofer, MCC Philippines

American or international schools are usually located in capitals or large, cosmopolitan centers and are therefore not available to the many MCCers placed in backwoods assignments. Their advantage is their academic excellence and the multi-cultural mix of their student bodies. ("American" schools frequently have more international students than North Americans.)

These schools are attractive especially to MCC teens. Because of their Western orientation, they give teens a firmer rooting and sense of self-identity in their dominant culture. Many also offer extracurricular activities--sports, music, etc.--that may be important to teens.

On the down side, the high cost of such schools troubles some MCC parents, and alcohol, drugs and sex may be as readily available as they reportedly are in North American schools. And, as Joy Hofer pointed out, children who attend an American or international school may find themselves in a totally different social milieu than that of their parents. Echoing Hofer's comments, Janet Reedy, MCC Thailand, wrote, "Our daughter was going to school with children from wealthy diplomatic and business families, and the MCC lifestyle was a marked contrast which she had to come to terms with...her life was only marginally connected with the Thai culture."

Boarding School

Boarding schools have many of the pros and cons of American or international schools. In their academic standards, Western orientation, multicultural student bodies and costs, they are similar. The crucial difference, of course, is that children live at the school, often far from family; for that reason, few MCC families choose this option.

Boarding school itself represents an additional "culture," as pointed out by Claire Ewert, former MCC worker in the Philippines. This can provide an additional challenge for children struggling to adjust to a second culture.

The situation is further complicated for teens, who are searching for their personal identity. "The inconsistencies between the strict fundamentalist discipline that our children experienced in boarding and the more liberal 'give-them-freedom-to-grow' that we practice has created great confusion for one of our children," Ewert wrote.

Even when the boarding school experience is a positive one for the child, it causes dislocations in family dynamics that merit advance planning. "Often there was maturation and missed school events that were hard to catch up on. It was as if each time the children came home we had to get to know different people. We had gotten pretty used to being a childless couple and then the kids came home. After a week and a half or two weeks, we were starting to relate as a family again. Then it was time to go back to boarding," Ewert related.

"None of us would say boarding school is a bad experience; we would say think about it, talk about it, plan for it *ahead of time* -- not just from the point of view of the absent child, but from that of the one(s) staying at home," advised Melody Rupley, former MCC worker in Burkina Faso.

HOW CAN MCC HEADQUARTERS SUPPORT FAMILIES?

Headquarters generally received high marks from MCC families. They appreciate children's orientation, special mailings at Christmas and Easter, and the overall support they feel from headquarters.

Although most felt that once on the field MCCers need to find support locally, some sentiments were expressed that headquarters could perform two invaluable services: (1) Better prepare families before departure for the challenges ahead; and (2) Periodically inform MCC families about available resources.

As David Neufeld pointed out in the section entitled, "When in France...", a little advance knowledge about what the host culture expectations in the way of children's behavior, for example, can go a long way towards preventing problems.

Karen Metzler, Burkina Faso, offered two further suggestions for pre-departure preparation:

- (1) Special orientation sessions for families, as well as times for parents to get together to express their fears about health, schooling, children's adjustment, etc. "It's important for children to have this chance, too," she added;
- (2) A clear statement from Akron that families must take priority, especially during the first months. "If parents go into an MCC assignment with tons of enthusiasm, ready to learn the language, meet people, start project work, etc. and then find their children needing them all the time...Well, the possibilities for real problems are evident."

Out in the field, far from libraries, phones and rec centers, one can quickly feel cut off from resources. MCCers felt headquarters could help fill the void, providing information on home-schooling programs, game/recreational ideas that can be done cross culturally and that preferably take no common language, supportive materials for older children, etc. "I believe children are important and much more helpful information could be collected and shared," stated Harvey Harman, South Africa.

--Emily Will, Editor